

**Pine Telephone System, Inc.
Dry Creek Fiber Optic Line
OR 57640
EA #OR-035-02-10**

I. Introduction

A. Purpose and Need for Proposed Action

Pine Telephone System, Inc., of Halfway, Oregon, has submitted a right-of-way application for the installation and maintenance of a buried fiber optic telecommunication cable. The purpose of the project is to provide improved and more dependable service, including enhancement of communications in times of emergencies, to rural residents in the Hooker Flat area east of Halfway.

B. Conformance with BLM Land Use Plans

The proposed action is in conformance with the Baker Resource Management Plan (RMP), approved July 12, 1989. The proposed route of the project lies within the Baker County Geographic Unit as designated in the RMP. Public lands are to be available for local rights-of-way. The route is not in an avoidance or exclusion area.

The RMP also states that new rights-of-way should follow existing corridors wherever practical. This proposed right-of-way would follow a power line for about half of its route.

C. Relationship to Other Plans

Baker County has zoned the area Exclusive Farm Use. Local utilities are an outright permitted use in this zone.

D. Statutes, Laws, and Regulations Affecting the Proposal

The proposed project would be appropriately authorized under Title V of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and regulations at 43 CFR 2800.

II. Description of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

The proposed facilities consist of a buried fiber optic communications cable and the necessary connecting boxes and pedestals. Warning markers may be placed where deemed advisable to protect the cable from future excavation activities. The length of the right-of-way would be about 4600 feet and the width would be 30

feet.

The proposed route enters BLM land after running up the East Dry Creek Road (county road #1071) which lies to the west. It enters BLM land coming from the southwest, then immediately turns and runs about 250 feet south, with the BLM-private boundary on its right, approximately identified by a fence. It then turns east and runs up a moderate slope, with the property boundary, fence, and an electric power line immediately on its right. After about ¼ mile, it passes under the power line (as that facility turns and angles to the northeast). It continues up a ridge beside the power line for about 1400 feet, then veers to the southeast across the upper reach of an ephemeral draw and over another ridge and across a primitive road which runs on this ridge, and down a moderately steep slope to connect to existing facilities running along the Hooker Flat Road (county road #1007). See maps attached to this report.

The cable would be buried a minimum of 36 inches and housed in PVC plastic conduit. It would be direct buried by using a narrow plow shoe pulled behind a heavy-duty crawler tractor. A second machine would follow and compact the disturbed area with one of its tracks. The surface would be smoothed and re-seeded as necessary. If rock is encountered, a backhoe or rock saw may be needed to excavate a trench for the cable. Best Management Practices (BMPs) would be employed as necessary to minimize soil disturbance and movement.

After installation, maintenance needs are expected to be virtually non-existent. This route is in an area where there is practically no possibility of damage to the cable.

The only alternative considered is No Action, in which case the cable would not be installed.

Three other routes were considered but dropped from further analysis.

- \$ Follow the route of the electric power line for its entire length across public land. This was rejected because this route becomes too steep and rocky at its east end.
- \$ Stay on ridge tops for most of the route by continuing up the ridge near the power line, around the head of the ephemeral draw, and down the ridge west of Hooker Flat Road. This was rejected because the second ridge is very rocky with little soil, would require the use of a rock saw for much of this route, would result in greater total disturbance, and may well be economically impractical.
- \$ Run the cable along Hooker Flat Road from the south. This was rejected due to economic considerations. The applicant must provide improved service to residents along East Dry Creek Road, as well as Hooker Flat Road. To run parallel routes up both roads would be prohibitive.

III. Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action

A. General Setting

The location of the Proposed Action is about six miles northeast of Halfway and four miles north of Highway 82. The route crosses public lands lying between East Dry Creek Road and Hooker Flat Road. The lands involved are described as follows:

WM, T. 7S., R. 46E., sec. 25, N½NE¼; T. 7S., R. 47E., sec. 30, lots 1 & 2.

The project location is in the foothills of the Wallowa Mountains. Topography of the immediate area is moderately rolling, consisting of intermittent or ephemeral draws and adjacent ridges with shallow and somewhat rocky soils. The entire area slopes generally to the south. Elevation along the proposed route varies from about 3000 feet to 3440.

B. Critical Elements

The following Critical Elements are not present on the project area or would not be affected by the Proposed Action, and are therefore not further discussed: Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, Environmental Justice, Prime/Unique Farmlands, Floodplains, Tribal Concerns & Treaty Rights, Solid/Hazardous Waste, Drinking/Ground Water Quality, Wild & Scenic Rivers, and Wilderness Areas.

The remaining Critical Elements would be affected or otherwise merit additional discussion.

1. Air Quality

Air quality in the area is generally very good. It could be affected by the Proposed Action from dust being raised during construction activities. Any effects would be minimal, highly localized, and short-term. As soon as the activity is completed, it would quickly clear up.

2. Cultural/Historic Resources

A survey for cultural resources was conducted by a contract archaeologist. No cultural material was found.

3. Threatened and Endangered Species

A "Biological Assessment and Evaluation of Fish, Wildlife, and Plant Species", dated September 4, 2002, was prepared by Allan E. Thomas Ecological Consultants for the Dry Creek Fiber Optic Cable Project. This report covered the entire Dry Creek project, not just the portion on BLM (required because the project is funded by the Rural Utilities Service). It was determined that the project would have no adverse effects on species populations nor result in the destruction or adverse modification of critical or crucial habitats. A copy of this report is in the case file.

The applicant's consultant requested informal consultation under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act for threatened, endangered, and candidate species that might be present. In a letter dated October 31, 2002, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with a "may affect, but not likely to adversely affect" determination for these species, specifically bald eagle, bull trout, yellow-billed cuckoo, and Columbia spotted frog.

4. Wetlands/Riparian Vegetation

The only riparian vegetation that might be present along the route are some shrubs, consisting mainly of hawthorn and willow, along an intermittent stream near where the route enters the west edge of BLM land. The cable would run a short distance to the south of this stream as it enters BLM, then turn and run south away from this stream. It is anticipated that there would be no effect on this vegetation, or would be negligible.

C. Other Environmental Components

1. Vegetation

The vegetative type along the route is low condition grassland with scattered patches of shrubs. The vegetation is rather sparse over much of the area. The major grass species is Sandberg's bluegrass, with small amounts of bluebunch wheatgrass, squirreltail, and medusahead wildrye also present. Shrub species include bitterbrush, elderberry, snowberry, and chokecherry. The greatest concentration of shrubs is along the power line portion of the route. Forb species observed included arrowleaf balsamroot, stoneseed, yarrow, buckwheat, and lupine, as well as a number of annual species.

Vegetation directly in the path of the cable plow, in a strip up to 3-4 feet in width, would be destroyed during the installation of the cable. Vegetation in a wider strip of up to 10-12 feet (the width of the construction equipment) would be disturbed but likely survive. It is intended to “meander” the route through the shrub patches when they are encountered in order to minimize damage to shrubs. Nevertheless, it is probably inevitable that a few individual shrub plants would be damaged or destroyed.

The reseeding measures included in the Proposed Action would replace the destroyed vegetation with the seeded species, which would change the present species composition.

2. Soils

The soil map unit on most of the route is Gwinly-Immig very cobbly silt loam. The unit on the west portion of the route (the slope above the East Dry Creek valley) is the Gwinly-Immig-Snell very cobbly silt loam. The three soils named are all basaltic in origin. They range in depth from shallow to moderately deep and have a moderate to high erosion hazard.

Soils would be disturbed and displaced during the plowing and trenching, and the profile would be disrupted. After backfilling, the loosened soil and lack of vegetation would make the soil more prone to erosion, especially on steeper slopes. These slopes are primarily at each end of the route, and also as the route descends into and climbs back out the ephemeral draw. If the backfilled soil were to settle and create a “gutter” that would channel water, the erosion hazard would increase.

The BMPs that would be applied, such as adequate compaction of the backfilled soil, waterbars, and reseeding, would keep erosion problems to a minimum.

3. Water Resources/Hydrology

The cable route crosses near the head of one ephemeral draw. This draw apparently carries water only rarely and for short periods of time during snowmelt or storm events. If excess fill material or loosened soil were allowed to remain in the draw channel, it could

be flushed out during the next event and cause deposition downstream.

The west and east ends of the route are on slopes above intermittent streams which drain into East Dry Creek and Long Branch, respectively. There would be no effect to these streams.

4. Wildlife Habitat

Wildlife habitat is minimal due to the sparse vegetation. Deer and elk probably make some use of the area. A variety of songbirds could be expected.

A negligible amount of wildlife forage would be destroyed and largely replaced by the reseeding measures. Wildlife would be frightened away by the presence of men and equipment and the noise of the construction activity. After the project is completed, wildlife would return and there would be no long-term effect.

5. Livestock Forage/Management/Improvements

The proposed route lies within grazing allotment Hooker Flat #3009. There would be a negligible amount of livestock forage destroyed during the installation of the cable. This would be replaced by the reseeding measures. If the work occurs while stock are in the allotment, there may be some temporary short-term disruption. There would be no long-term effect on use or management of the allotment.

The route passes through the fence at the west end of the allotment. This fence would probably have to be taken down during construction at that location. The route also runs near the fence at its west end. This fence could be damaged if care is not taken.

6. Visual Resources

The visual management rating (VRM) for the project area is Class III. In this class, activities may attract attention but should not dominate the view of the casual observer.

The west end of the route would be visible to travelers on the East Dry Creek Road, though at some distance. The east end would be visible very briefly to travelers on the Hooker Flat Road, where the route comes down the slope to the road. Both of these roads are

lightly traveled county roads. The scar that would result would be quite noticeable for a time, but would fade as the seeding takes hold.

The pedestals and warning markers, if any, would be visible only to those in the immediate vicinity.

7. Noxious Weeds

Knapweed was observed in the general area, though not along the route. Soil disturbance and the removal of vegetation could encourage the spread of this and other noxious weeds. The reseeding measure would retard the spread of noxious weeds.

8. Other Land Uses/Rights/Facilities

As stated earlier, the proposed route runs alongside a power line for some distance. There would be no effect to that line.

The route crosses a primitive road on the ridge above Hooker Flat Road. This road would be rendered impassable temporarily. Once the cable is installed and backfill properly compacted, the road would be useable again and there would be no long-term effect.

9. Access

Legal and physical access to the area is provided by the above mentioned primitive road off the Hooker Flat Road. This road runs up the ridge which parallels the Hooker Flat Road to the west. The primitive road crosses the fiber optic route where that route crosses over the ridge, then continues to and beyond the electric power line. The road appears to be infrequently used, probably mostly by the grazing permittee, casual hunters and sightseers, and to inspect and maintain the power line.

Travel on the road would be prohibited for a short time during installation of the cable. There would be no long-term effect.

10. Socio-Economic

The only impacts would be to the residents along Hooker Flat Road, who would receive the improved communications service necessary to fully participate in modern society.

D. Cumulative Impacts

The impacts from the Proposed Action would be added incrementally to the impacts already occurring from other uses in the area. Those are minimal

and consist of dust and soil disturbance from the infrequent use of the primitive road, vegetative impacts from livestock grazing, and the visual impact of the power line. The added impacts from the Proposed Action would be minimal.

IV. Environmental Consequences of No Action

Under this alternative, the above impacts would not occur. The residents along Hooker Flat Road may have to do with sub-par telecommunications service, or the applicant would have to choose another route, which would likely be longer, more expensive, and result in greater resource impacts.

On-going effects on various resources along the proposed route from existing uses (see above under Cumulative Impacts) would continue.

V. Mitigation Measures

The applicant should apply the following mitigation measures to prevent or reduce impacts:

- Avoid destruction of shrub plants as much as possible.
- \$ Compact backfill material adequately to prevent settling and the creation of a “gutter” that may channel water.
- \$ Repair the primitive road as necessary at the location of the fiber optic crossing.
- At the crossing of the ephemeral draw, remove all excess fill material and restore the contour of the channel to avoid a restriction in water flow and possible deposition of material downstream or erosion of streambanks. Also restore the streambank as needed to prevent erosion or cutting of the bank.
- Construct waterbars where needed. This is expected to be on the steeper slopes at both ends of the route, and above the ephemeral draw. This would control soil erosion.
- Seed where needed with an approved species mixture. This measure would replace destroyed vegetation, provide soil protection, and retard invasion by noxious weeds.
- Avoid damage to fences. If damage does occur, repair adequately in a timely manner.
- Scatter and smooth any excess fill material. This would reduce the visibility of the project. Do not deposit any excess material in the draw channel.
- \$ Clean vehicles and equipment of vegetative matter before entering or leaving public lands. This would reduce the chance of spreading noxious weeds.
- Provide weed control on the right-of-way when needed.
- Avoid any impact to any structure on the electric power line.

VI. Residual Impacts

With the application of the above measures, the following impacts would be expected:

- Minor, short-term, localized affect on air quality from dust.
- Minor disturbance and destruction of vegetation, replaced by the seeded species.
- Minor dislocation and disturbance of soil. Possible threat of soil erosion, minimized by compaction, waterbars, and reseeding.
- Minimal visual impact.
- Small threat of noxious weed invasion, minimized by cleaning vegetation from vehicles and equipment, and the reseeding measures.
- Temporary disruption to driving on the primitive road.
- Improved service to nearby residents.

VII. Contacts and Consultation

The following entities were contacted by telephone or letter.

Baker County Planning Department
Baker County Road Department
Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation
Nez Perce Tribe
Grazing permittee in Hooker Flat Allotment
Nearby land owners
Idaho Power Company, owner of electric line

Concurrence was sought and received from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Weyers Consulting, the applicant's consultant, contributed information and assistance in the preparation of this document.

VIII. Participating Staff

Steve Davidson, Realty Specialist
Mary Oman, Archaeologist
Clair Button, Botanist
Gregory Miller, Wildlife Biologist
Jackie Dougan, Fisheries Biologist